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THE KENSINGTON RUNE STONE

IS IT THE OLDEST NATIVE DOCUMENT OF AMERICAN HISTORY?

H. R. HOLAND

One of the most interesting questions that has appeared in the historical field in many years is the one popularly known as the Kensington Rune Stone. It is now twenty-one years since it first came to light and during the first ten it lay still-born and utterly discredited as a crude forgery. Since then, however, it has not only come to life but has survived numerous attacks by learned critics, until it now is a subject of debate by experts of two continents.

The object of this review is to present the latest phases of the discussion concerning the rune stone to the readers of the *WISCONSIN MAGAZINE OF HISTORY*, but I am in a quandary as to where I should begin. Some of our readers are quite familiar with the various stages of the controversy but I understand that the greater number have merely heard its name. In view of this, perhaps a very brief introduction of the subject will be desirable.

The Kensington Rune Stone is a slab of graywacke about thirty inches long, seventeen inches wide, and seven inches thick. It weighs about two hundred and thirty pounds. Three-fifths of the length of its face is covered by an inscription in very neat runic characters. This inscription is continued for a similar distance on one of its sides. The uninscribed two-fifths of its length was evidently intended to be planted in the ground.

The stone was found by a farmer by the name of Olaf Ohman, who lives about three or four miles northeast of Kensington, a station on the Minneapolis, St. Paul and Sault Ste. Marie Railway, in the west central part of Minne-

sota. He was grubbing stumps on his land which consists in part of a rolling elevation surrounded by a marsh. In grubbing out a poplar tree, about eight to ten inches in diameter, he found the stone on this elevation just beneath the surface of the ground, lying with the inscribed face downward, closely embraced by the roots of the tree.

The find was soon brought to the attention of a number of learned men of the time. Strangely enough, the deciphering of the inscription seemed to present great difficulties to these men, who were unable to read a large portion of it. They made out, however, that the inscription mentioned Vinland—the name which Leif Ericson in the year 1000 bestowed upon a certain portion of the Atlantic coast of America. As the language employed, or as much of it as was made out, was plainly not that of Leif Ericson's tongue, the inscription was quickly pronounced a clumsy forgery. The stone was returned to Mr. Ohman, therefore, who made of it a suitable doorstep to his granary.

Nine years later I chanced to be in that vicinity in search of material for my history of the Norwegian settlements in America. The old runic hoax was recalled to me; and as I for years had been interested in the study of runes, I obtained the stone from Mr. Ohman as an interesting souvenir.

When I returned home and deciphered the inscription my amusement changed to amazement for I decided that it was not a clumsy forgery dealing with Leif Ericson's discovery of America in the year 1000, but that it contained a dramatic recital of an expedition into the middle of the continent in the year 1362! The language and runes of Leif Ericson's time could easily have been imitated as we have a multitude of patterns of both; but the date 1362 is a peculiarly difficult one, not only linguistically and runologically, but also historically. What an unheard of date in which to locate Norsemen in America! This forger, if he was one, was evidently a most courageous man. The following is a copy of the inscription with interlinear transliteration:

Þ: Y Ö T T R : F F : F F R R Y T T : B F :
8 g ö t e r o k 22 n o r m a n f o

: F B P X Y T F H T P X R P : P R F :
o p b a g e l s e f a r p f r o

Y T T F X T P : F P : Y T H T : Y T :
v i n l a n d o f v e s t : v e

* X P T : F X Y I R : Y T P : F : H F X R : T T :
h a p e l æ g i r v e p 2 o k f a r e n

P X Y H : R I H T : T F R R : P R F : P T H : H T T :
p a g s r i s e n o r r f r o p e n o s t e n

Y T : Y X R : F F : P I H T : T T : P X Y * : X B T I R
v i r a r o k f i s k e n p a g h æ f t i r

Y T : F F Y : * T Y : P X T : P : Y X T : R Ö P T :
v i k o m h e m f a n 10 m a n r ö p e

X P : C F T P : F Y : P T P : A V M :
a t l o p o k p e p A V M

P R X T F H T : X P : I F F Y :
p r æ l s e a f i l l y

* X R : P : Y X T H : Y T : * X Y T : X T : H T :
n a r 10 m a n s v e h a v e t t a t s e

X B T I R : Y F R T : H F I B : F F : P X Y * : R I H T :
æ f t i r v o r e o k i t 14 p a g h r i s e

P R F Y : P T T F : Ø * : X * R : F F P F
f r o m p a n o ö k a h r 1362

* This character has suffered so much from weathering as to be illegible.

† The runic character for e in this word was inadvertently omitted in making this copy.

I translate as follows, putting into parentheses words which the rune master seems to have omitted:

Eight Goths¹ and twenty-two Norsemen on (an) exploration-journey from Vinland through the western regions. We had camp by two skerries one day's journey north from this stone. We were (out) and fished one day. When we came home (we) found ten men, red with blood and dead. Ave Maria! Save (us) from evil!

(We) have ten of our party by the sea to look after (or for) our vessels 14 day journey from this island. Year 1362.

At first sight the truth of this inscription seems most improbable. That a band of adventurers should have penetrated to the very heart of the continent one hundred and thirty years before America was discovered by Columbus seems so incredible that almost everyone who hears of it is prompted to ask, "Can this be possible?" Yet this objection so generally urged is really very superficial. We have many other journeys on record, of greater extent and more hazardous, which we know to have been performed. For instance, Ferdinand de Soto in 1542 pushed one thousand five hundred miles into the primeval forest of America. Jean Nicolet without a single white companion in 1634 made a journey of two thousand miles amid savage tribes who never before had seen a white man and returned to tell the tale. So also did that amazing fur trader, Peter Pond, who in the years 1773-86 wandered at will with his wares all over the Northwest, penetrating even to the Great Slave Lake. Cabeza de Vaca in 1537 crossed the continent from the mouth of the Mississippi to California with only three companions. We have no reason to suppose that it was safer to sojourn among the Indians in 1537 than in 1362. Nor have we reason to suppose that the hardy Norsemen were less capable than the Spaniards of making arduous journeys. Is it not rather a reasonable supposition that the Norsemen should finally undertake to explore this continent which they had discovered

¹i.e., native to West Gothland in the southwestern part of Sweden. In the fourteenth century this was an independent province, united with a part of Norway under one king.

three hundred and sixty-two years previously and which we know from other indubitable historical records they occasionally visited?²

After a prolonged study of the inscription I became convinced that this remarkable stone had been rejected without a proper investigation. The verdict pronounced against it ten years previously was based on an extremely faulty reading of the inscription and the arguments advanced against it did not, therefore, apply. With the hope of directing public attention once more to the matter, I presented my views to the public. Since then it has been a lively subject of debate both here and in Europe.

Out of the widely extended controversy which followed has gradually come a clearer understanding of the surrounding field of research. We have learned that the vernacular of South Sweden (the home of the rune master) in 1362 was not greatly different from its modern language, being analogous in its development with the same period of English speech. We have also discovered several important historical side lights which serve to illuminate the subject. There are now many men of learning who recognize in this inscription the oldest American historical document dealing with the coming of white men to this country.

In this research the Minnesota Historical Society has taken a prominent part. Shortly after I published my reasons for believing the inscription a true record of pre-Columbian exploration the society appointed a committee of five members, headed by the late Professor N. H. Winchell, to make a thorough investigation of the subject. After more than a year's investigation this committee published a preliminary report of sixty printed pages, concluding with the resolution that the committee "takes a favorable view of the authenticity of the Kensington Rune Stone." After this

²The last historical voyage to America was made in 1347; see *Islandske Annaler*, edited by Professor Gustav Storm.

report appeared in print the inscription was the subject of much argument both at home and abroad. The committee therefore waited almost two years before rendering its final report. After all arguments on both sides seemed to have been presented, the committee published its final report, reaffirming in positive terms its conviction that the inscription is genuine.³

The committee's report is especially valuable for the light it throws on the geological and topographical conditions which center around the stone and which the committee finds to be strong evidence in favor of the inscription. It also adopts and amplifies the theory that the explorers came by way of Hudson Bay.⁴ The committee has been criticised for not having had any competent scholar in Scandinavian languages present at its sittings. However, it had a better way. Instead of relying on any one scholar who might be unduly prejudiced for or against the stone the committee obtained opinions on all mooted linguistic questions from as many supposed experts on both sides as possible. With these opinions before it the committee was able to give them the impartial consideration of a judicial review.

LINGUISTIC OBJECTIONS

Aside from the superficial argument that such an expedition is too improbable to be true the most general criticism has been against the linguistic aspects of the inscription. Different words have been pointed out to show that the language is not in accordance with fourteenth century usage. The weakness of this line of criticism is the lack of agreement among the critics. What one critic has pointed to as a serious anachronism has been admitted to be perfectly legitimate by another.

³ Both reports with many illustrations are printed in the *Minnesota Historical Collections*, XV, 221-86.

⁴ This theory was first advanced by Professor Andrew Fossum in an article printed in the Northfield (Minn.) *Norwegian-American*, Oct. 9. 1909. I shall later in this discussion point out further evidence in support of this theory.

An illustration of these linguistic arguments we have in the so-called English words on the stone. These are "mans," "from," "illy," and "of vest." These words were for years the most controverted parts of the inscription; many critics have pointed to them as the strongest evidence that the inscription can not be genuine. By the use of these words they claimed the rune master has proved himself a forger—that he must have been an immigrant who had already become so Americanized he could no longer write his mother tongue. However, when these words were submitted to Professors Södervall, Kock, and Jonsson, the most eminent philologists of Sweden and Denmark, they recognized them as rare and antique forms sporadically occurring in the dialects of the fourteenth century, showing an intimate acquaintance with obsolete forms on the part of the rune master.⁵ The linguistic forms of the inscription have indeed proved a boomerang to its critics. As one of the most eminent professors of Scandinavian languages in this country, not a believer in the inscription, said: "There is not a man who has criticised the language of the rune stone who has not burned his fingers."

It is reasonable to suppose that the men mentioned in the inscription were wandering soldiers and sailors gathered from different parts of Norway and Sweden (Gothland). Their orthography, grammar, and phonetics may therefore be supposed to partake of the irregular, careless forms characteristic of such roving people. It is therefore as unreasonable to judge the language of such men by the conventional literary forms of the monastic clerks of that period as it would now be to compare the language of an illiterate soldier of fortune with that of a college professor. Notwithstanding these eccentricities of speech it is possible to justify the presence

⁵ For a full discussion of these and other criticized words see my article entitled, "Are There English Words On the Kensington Rune-Stone?" in *Records of the Past*, IX, 240-45; "The Kensington Rune-Stone Abroad," *Ibid.*, X, 260-71. See also Professor Fossum's able analysis in the *Norwegian-American*, Feb. 24, 1911.

of every word in the inscription with one exception with the speech of Bohuslæn, Sweden, of the Middle Ages. This one exception is the word *opdage*. It has not been found in any of the literary remains of that period. Södervall, the Noah Webster of Sweden, says that while the word looks suspicious, he knows of no other word in use at that time expressing the same idea. It has been suggested that the word is a loan from the Dutch or East-Friesian where it early occurs.⁶ As there was much commerce between Scandinavian and Dutch and Friesian ports sailors would be among the first to pick up such words. We have diaries written by Scandinavian seamen of the Middle Ages in which Dutch and German words frequently occur, showing that such loans were common.⁷ Personally I do not believe it is a loan from these countries as the word occurs in the form *updaaga* in the dialects of Upper Telemarken and other remote parts of Norway where the speech has had an autochthonous development with but very few loans from abroad.

The present meaning of the word *opdage* is "to discover," but in all the dialects of the Middle Ages mentioned in the above paragraph it had a different meaning. It then meant "to reveal, to come to light, to make known." This is exactly the meaning of the word as it is used on the rune stone. These adventurers did not set out "to discover" a prospective objective, but were on a journey "to make known," "to bring to light," "to reveal" a terra incognita. The word I use in translating it—"exploration-journey"—is only approximately correct.

THE DALECARLIAN THEORY

The most elaborate attack on the Kensington stone is an address delivered by Professor G. T. Flom before the Illinois

⁶ See *Nederlandsch Woordenboek*, XI, 407-11; *Wörterbuch der Ostfriesischen Sprache*; and *Kalkars Ordbog over det Danske Sprog i Middelalderen*.

⁷ See for instance the diary of Alexander Leyell, telling of his journey to Greenland in 1605, which abounds in Dutch loan-words.

State Historical Society and later printed by him.⁸ The chief feature of this address is an attempt to prove that the inscription is the modern fabrication of a native of the district of Dalarne in Sweden in which district the use of runes sporadically existed down to the close of the eighteenth century. Professor Flom is so positive in his belief that he has identified the runes and language of the Kensington stone with those of Dalarne that he feels able to name the parish from which the runic forger hailed. We shall quickly see how correct he is in his identification.

For proof Professor Flom refers to the Dalecarlian alphabets as given by Liljegren and Ihre-Götlin. Unfortunately he omits to print these so that the reader may collate the Kensington alphabet with them. We will therefore do so now. In the accompanying table I give these alphabets exactly as they are reproduced by Professor Noreen in his exhaustive discussion of the Dalecarlian runes in *Fornvænnen* for 1906.

A glance at these alphabets will convince the reader that the writer of the Kensington inscription did not get his runic lore from them. Instead of identity we find here such disparity in form that no runic inscription of the Middle Ages is more dissimilar to the Kensington alphabet than are the Dalecarlian inscriptions. Only *b*, *h*, *i*, *m*, and *r* are identical in form; *a*, *d*, *f*, *t*, and *ø* are of the same type but show variations, while *c*, *g*, *k*, *l*, *o*, *p*, *q*, *v*, *x*, *y*, *z*, *æ*, and *å* show more or less recent fantastic forms approaching in many cases the printed Latin forms which came into use. In some cases the character representing one letter has been adopted to represent another; thus we have the character for *h* adopted to represent *å*, and the *s* has been attributed to *x*.

When we compare the linguistic forms of Dalarne with those of the Kensington inscription Flom's theory proves

⁸ Illinois State Historical Society, *Transactions*, 1910, 105-25.

DALECARLIAN

o:q uo n x y z a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o p q r s t u v x y z

KENSINGTON

o:q uo n x y z a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o p q r s t u v x y z

IHRE-GÖTLIN

o:q uo n x y z a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o p q r s t u v x y z

LILJEGREN

o:q uo n x y z a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o p q r s t u v x y z

equally untenable. To be brief there are two convincing proofs why the Kensington scribe has not employed the dialect of Dalarne. The first is that for the last three hundred years the aspirate *h* has dropped out of the Dalecarlian speech.⁹ In contrast to this we find the Kensington inscription abounding in aspirates such as *hem*, *har*, *hade*, *havet*, *dagh*, *öh*, *ahr*, etc. The other is that the word-forms in Dalarne are in many cases very different. If the inscription were in the dialect of Dalarne, we would find *ema* for *hem*, *ela* for *illy*, *menn* for *man*, *ør* for *ahr*, *sjå* for *se*, *vesto* for *vest*, *nordo* for *nord*, *resa* for *rise*, *duæ* for *dedh*, *voro* for *var*, *bluæd* for *blodh*, *kumo* for *kom*, *ver* for *vi*, *sker* for *skjær*, *esu* for *deno*, *sen* for *havet*, etc.¹⁰ No Swedish dialect is further from the Kensington inscription than the Dalecarlian.

IS SUCH AN EXPEDITION HISTORICALLY PROBABLE?

The most remarkable thing about this inscription is its date. Removed as it is more than three hundred years from the time of the Norse discoveries of America it seemed so remote, so incompatible with known facts, that this more than anything else prejudiced the critical mind against it. For years it was treated as the wild guess of some simpleton, ignorant of the most elementary facts in early American history.

A careful study of documents dealing with the history of Greenland, however, sheds light on this apparent absurdity and shows that the date is most fitting. We learn from these documents that immediately prior to the date on the rune stone there was a great revival of Greenland commerce. Traffic to America was again resumed, or, at least, America was again discovered; a Norse expedition sent out by the king was actually in American waters in 1362. To under-

⁹ See Boethius, Levander, and Noreen in their joint discussion of Dalecarlian inscriptions in *Fornvænnen* 1906, 63-91.

¹⁰ See Noreen's *Ordlista Öfver Dalmålet*.

stand these documents a brief glance at Greenland's history is necessary.

Greenland was settled in the latter part of the tenth century and soon became quite populous. The colony was divided into two parts, known as the Eastern and the Western settlements, both of them, however, lying on the west coast of Greenland. The Eastern settlement was the larger, containing twelve parishes and churches, several nunneries and monasteries, and a resident bishop. This lay a short distance west of Cape Farwell. About four hundred miles farther northwest lay the Western settlement, containing three churches. During the first two hundred years of its history we find frequent mention of Greenland in Icelandic annals and chronicles, showing that intercourse between the two countries was frequent.¹¹ Little by little this intercourse seems to have ceased until toward the end of the thirteenth century we read only at long intervals the meager mention of the ordination of a new bishop for Greenland.

Under date of 1309 we are informed that the bishop of Greenland has returned to Norway. A new bishop is ordained and sails for Greenland.¹² No further mention is made of Greenland for more than thirty years; not even the archbishop knew whether the Greenland bishop was still alive. Under date of 1343 we come to the next entry, stating that a new bishop for Greenland was ordained. Later it adds that this was a mistake as the old bishop was still alive.¹³ It also adds that the new bishop was unable to find transportation to Greenland and never reached his charge. This shows that commerce and intercourse between the two countries had at that time almost ceased.

¹¹ See particularly *Floamanna Saga*, *Fostbrædra Saga*, also various *Thættir* in *Flateyjarbok*.

¹² See *Flatey Annals* and other annals under given date.

¹³ See *Flatey Annals*; *Skalholt Annals*; the annals copied by Bishop Skuleson (A.M.410,4); also A.M.411,4; 417,4; and 429,4 under 1342 and 1343.

About this time, however, we come to a great improvement in the relations of the mother country with her distant colony. In the year 1341 the Bishop of Bergen, alarmed, perhaps, at not hearing anything from his old friend, the Bishop of Greenland, selected one of the trustiest priests of his diocese and sent him to Greenland "upon errands of the Church."¹⁴ This priest was Ivar Bardsen to whose account we are principally indebted for what we know of Greenland in the Middle Ages. The letter gives the impression that Bardsen was expected to make only a brief sojourn in Greenland and then return. However, we find later that he remained there many years as business manager of the large properties that belonged to the Greenland cathedral.¹⁵

Ivar Bardsen gives a cheerful account of the conditions of the Eastern settlement, showing it to be in prosperous circumstances. He presumably sent a similar report back to his superior in Bergen. This probably explains the revival of Greenland's commerce which immediately followed. In 1344 a merchant by the name of Thord Egilsson made a trip from Bergen to Greenland and returned the same year with much goods. The following year a very large merchant vessel was fitted out in Bergen and sailed for Greenland. In 1346 it returned with "an immense amount of goods." As the king at that time lived in Bergen these things would no doubt come under his personal observation. It also seems that the profits of these Greenland traders were so large that the king decided to reserve the trade as his special monopoly. This he did by proclamation in 1348.

Some time after Ivar Bardsen reached Greenland he was commissioned by the chief public officer of the colony to proceed with a company of men to the Western settlement for the purpose of driving the Eskimos out of this settlement. When

¹⁴ A copy of his letter commending his messenger to the good will of all concerned is found in the Bartholin MSS. Tomen Litr. E. S. 479, Copenhagen.

¹⁵ We find him back again in Norway in 1364 where he is recorded as being a witness in a legal trial.

he and his men reached the Western settlement they found it entirely depopulated. Neither Norsemen nor Eskimos were found; but instead they found an abundance of cattle and sheep wandering about without care.¹⁶

There is nothing in the account to suggest that the colonists had been massacred by the Eskimos. No bloodshed is mentioned, and there is no evidence of plunder. In fact this presumption is excluded as Ivar Bardsen found the cattle and sheep grazing about in great number. This shows that Bardsen's party must have reached the colony only a short time after the disappearance of the inhabitants as domestic animals could scarcely survive the severe winters of Greenland, nine months long, without care. The fragmentary account that is left to us gives absolutely no clew to what had happened there.

The answer to this question we find in a remarkable document found in the cathedral of Skalholt, in Iceland. This cathedral was in the Middle Ages the great repository of Icelandic records and literary treasures. In 1630 it was destroyed by fire, and a great mass of these documents perished. Bishop Gisle Oddson, who was born at Skalholt, being a son of the former bishop, Odd Einerson, was for many years officiating in the cathedral and therefore had the fullest opportunity of becoming acquainted with its manuscripts. After the fire he made from memory a synopsis of some of the most remarkable documents that were lost. The following is one of them:

1342. The inhabitants of Greenland fell voluntarily from the true faith and the Christian religion and after having given up all good man-

¹⁶ Following are the exact words of the text: "Item dette alt, som forsagt er sagde oss Iffver Bardsen GrønlÆnder, som var Forstander paa Bischobsgarden i Gardum paa Grønland udi mange Aar, at hand havde alt dette seett, och hand var en af dennem, som var udneffender af Lagmanden, at fare til Vesterbygden emod de Skrelinge, att uddriffve de Schrellinge udaff Vesterbygd; och da de komme didt, da funde de ingen mand, enten christen eller heden, uden noget villdt Fæ og Faaer, och bespissede sig aff det villdt Fæ, och toge saa meget som Schivene kunde berre, och zeylede saa dermed hjemb, och forschreffne Iffver var der med." See complete account printed in *Grønlands Historiske Mindesmerker*, III, 248-60, from an old Danish translation of the sixteenth century contained in the Arne Magnean MSS. No. 777.

ners and true virtues turned to the people of America. Some say that Greenland lies very near to the western lands of the world.¹⁷

There can be no question that here we find an explanation of the disappearance of the people of the Western settlement as witnessed by Ivar Bardsen. Left to themselves in that dismal region, scarcely seeing a European vessel once in a generation, it is no wonder if they gave up the doubtful blessing of the Church which was incapable of ministering to them and turned "voluntarily" to a region whose favored nature was a common tradition. One of their chief needs was timber, both for building and for fuel; for this they had to depend upon the doubtful contribution of the sea. They knew that this timber came from America (Markland).¹⁸ It would therefore be a most sensible decision to emigrate in a body to that place where all their needs would be easily supplied, taking with them what cattle they could.

It seems that this emigration of the western colonists resulted in trade relations being again resumed with America. Up to this time we have no mention in any record whatsoever of any vessel having sailed to America since Bishop Eric Upsi journeyed thither in 1121. However, five years after these colonists left for America we read of a vessel from Greenland which in 1347 "had been to Markland" (supposedly Nova Scotia or Southern Labrador).¹⁹ This vessel, carrying a crew of eighteen men, on her return voyage to Greenland lost her anchor and drifted ashore in Iceland. The next year it sailed to Bergen, having for a passenger Jon Guttorm-

¹⁷ "1342. Groenlandia incolæ a vera fide et religione christiana sponte sua defecerunt, et repudiatis omnibus honestis moribus et veris vertutibus ad Americæ populos se converterunt; existimant enim quidam Groenlandium adeo vicinam esse occidentalibus orbis regionibus." The document was translated out of the original records by Finn Magnussen, the eminent editor-in-chief of *Grønlands Historiske Mindesmerker*, and is printed there for the first time in Vol. III, 459.

¹⁸ There is an old account of the thirteenth century describing life in Greenland which mentions that the timber on which the Greenlanders depended "came out of the bays of Markland"; quoted in *Ibid.*, III, 243.

¹⁹ This fact is recorded in six different Icelandic annals; see among them the Flatey *Annals*, the Skalholt *Annals*, and the Odda *Annals* under 1347.

son, a great chieftain of Iceland, who went to Bergen to see the king.

We can easily imagine that the arrival of this vessel must have been a great event. Here was a company of Greenlanders who could not only give a complete account of their own almost unknown country but could do much more. Here for the first time as far as we know stood men upon Norwegian soil who could from experience tell of America—that mysterious land across the sea where grew the luscious grape and the “self-sown wheat.” They could tell of a land whose wealth of choice timber, rich fisheries, and fertile soil offered quite other favorable conditions of life than the bleak and barren shores of Greenland. No wonder that the king with such visions before him reserved trade with Greenland and the western lands as a private monopoly. We may also assume that he laid plans for immediately developing this monopoly and for extending his domains to the regions beyond.

However, that same year, 1348, there came to Bergen another vessel that gave the king quite other things to think about. This was the vessel which brought the terrible Black Plague to Norway. During the next few years this plague exacted a terrible toll in Norway, laying some sections of the land completely waste and paralyzing all industries. It also proved very fatal to shipping so that “many vessels had only four or five survivors.”

These conditions prevented the king for some years from carrying out his plans towards his western lands. But we find that in 1354 he is again occupied with the project. We have left to us a letter from him empowering Paul Knutson, one of his most prominent military and legal officers, to fit out an expedition and sail to Greenland. The purpose is stated to be to preserve Christianity. “We do this to the honor of God and for the sake of our soul and our predeces-

sors who established Christianity in Greenland and *we will not now let it perish.*"²⁰

The last words no doubt point to the spiritual salvation of the colonists of the Western settlement who in 1342 had apostatized from the true faith and emigrated to America.²¹ To find them would necessitate an exploration of the Western settlement and subsequently of unknown parts of America to which they had emigrated. This, again, explains the presence of such a notable leader as Paul Knutson and also the long absence of the expedition from home. It left Norway in 1355 but was not again heard of, according to Professor Storm, until 1363 or 1364.²²

If we assume that the expedition had only Greenland as an objective, it becomes very difficult to understand its long absence from home. Paul Knutson was a very important man of those times, being chief judicial officer of Gulathing (Gulathings Lagmand),²³ the largest judicial district, comprising all the western and central parts of Norway. He was also one of the king's *lendermænd* having in charge the administration of a large district near Bergen. Finally he was an officer in the king's army and a large landowner. It is inconceivable that such a man of affairs should linger year after year in the dreary little colony of Greenland. If, however, his mission meant the rescue of the lost colonists who had emigrated to unknown parts of America a few years before we

²⁰ An ancient Danish translation of this document is printed in *Grønlands Historiske Mindesmerker*, III, 120-22. Cf. also Storm's *Studier over Vinlandseiserne*, p. 365; Munch's *Det Norske Folks Historie, Unionsperioden*, I, 312.

²¹ The spiritual welfare of Greenland seems to have been a matter of deep concern to this pious monarch, Magnus Erikson. When he drew up his will in 1347 he left a large amount of money to the cathedral in Greenland.

²² See Storm, 365. Storm does not cite any authority for this conclusion. I find reason, however, to believe he is correctly informed by a statement which occurs in a fragmentary annal (Arne Magnussen 423-24) covering the years 1328-72. From this we learn that Bishop Alf was ordained bishop of Greenland in 1365. As it was customary to ordain a new bishop immediately or within a year after the news of his predecessor's death, and as his predecessor, Arnald, had died in 1349, this means that no vessel had returned from Greenland in the intervening years until shortly before 1365.

²³ See *Diplomarium Norwegicum*, 1347 and 1348.

see quite sufficient reasons for his continued absence. As a good Catholic he must have been horrified that so many of his king's subjects should have given up the faith and reverted to idolatry. He would feel it his duty to save them from eternal damnation by bringing them back into the Church. Moreover, as special representative of the king he would feel called upon to examine the material conditions of this new land (America) recently brought to the attention of the king and to which his subjects had emigrated, and see if it was worth annexing to the crown.

Here we have the striking coincidence of the presence of a Norse expedition in American waters in the very year recorded in the inscription. Documentary evidence here ends but we can easily conceive the missing link. It is reasonable to suppose that after searching about in the adjacent parts of Greenland and America for clues of the missing colonists, Paul Knutson and his party eventually reached the Vinland of traditional fame. Here a fortified base of operations is presumably established. Supposing this new land to be an island (which was the view held by all the old Norsemen) and reasoning that the colonists would be found somewhere on its shore, they send out an expedition to follow the shore and if necessary to circumnavigate the land. In the course of time they reach the interior of Hudson Bay. Here they find that the land again turns northward into the arctic wastes.²⁴

What now would be the reasonable thing to be done? To continue northward without ample provisions and equipment would be to yield themselves to the fate of the arctic winter.

²⁴ As is now well known, Vilhjalmur Stefansson in 1909 discovered a blonde tribe of huge Eskimos a short distance west of Hudson Bay, which may very likely be the descendants of the lost Greenland colonists. Among his collections is a photograph taken by his companion, Dr. Anderson of the University of Iowa. It shows Mr. Stefansson standing in the midst of a group of sixteen of these blonde Eskimos, every one of them having the facial appearance of a typical Norwegian farmer. Although Mr. Stefansson lacks but an inch of six feet in height he scarcely reaches to their shoulders. His account of his meeting with these strange people, printed in *My Life in the Arctic*, reads like an old-time epic. General Greely in the *National Geographic Magazine* points out that earlier arctic explorers have met this strange tribe of blonde Eskimos farther east.

Perhaps they were also under orders to report to headquarters in Vinland within a certain time. It is also likely that Hudson Bay was beginning to freeze over; its open season is only three months.

They could not go north, but to the south opened a broad and navigable highway—the Nelson River. They therefore decide to split the expedition, a small party to remain with the vessels over winter while the larger number go up the Nelson River and then back over land to Vinland. This would also give them the opportunity of exploring the interior of this new land. They, of course, had no conception of the vast continent which separated them from their headquarters. Their impression was that America was a large island, very long north and south but not so big east and west. As they had traveled a vast distance from Vinland toward the north and now in Hudson Bay had returned several hundred miles toward the south, they probably reasoned that by some further travel southward they would reach a point not very far from Vinland to the west. The probability of this theory is supported by the fact that when some time later ten of their number are killed by Indians they do not turn back but continue southeastward, which would be the direction of safety for them,—that is, their headquarters in Vinland, supposedly not far away.

Our knowledge of the Paul Knutson expedition throws new light on the inscription. It reads that this journey of exploration “through the western regions” came from Vinland—not from Norway or Greenland. This indicates that a lengthy stay had been made in the land just as was made by Knutson. It also mentions that they had more than one vessel; therefore it was a well-equipped expedition like Knutson’s. The Latin letters *A V M*, which are a part of the prayer that follows, suggest that a priest accompanied the party; this was no doubt the case in Knutson’s expedition which according to the king’s letter was a crusade for the

preservation of Christianity. Finally it would have been practically impossible for the survivors of the Kensington party to return to Norway until 1364 which is the very year when the survivors of Knutson's party returned home. The date of their return was not brought out, however, until 1889 when Storm's book, *Studier over Vinlandsreiserne*, appeared and incidentally mentions it. The opinion of geologists and the circumstances surrounding the finding of the stone unite, however, in the conclusion that the inscription must have been written long before that time as will be shown below.

The facts concerning the apostasy of the Greenland colonists and their subsequent emigration to America; the journey to Bergen, the king's residence; the Greenland voyagers who had been to America (Markland); the subsequent rescue expedition of Paul Knutson; and other facts mentioned above are very little known even among well-informed historians. They have been gleaned from various rare sources difficult of access and have been correlated and published here for the first time. It is therefore extremely unlikely that any runic charlatan perpetrating a hoax should have used this material as a basis for his purposeless account. If he by chance had known of the king's letter commissioning Knutson to start out on his expedition in 1355 he would have chosen a date for the inscription in more obvious agreement with it—say 1356 or 1357. For as stated above, the time of Knutson's return was not known until 1889—a number of years after the inscription by any theory could have been written. We have therefore here additional evidence in support of the truth of the inscription.

ARGUMENTS FOR THE AUTHENTICITY OF THE INSCRIPTION

I. The position of the stone *in situ*. The stone was found on a timbered elevation only a few feet from the edge of a marsh which surrounds it. About five hundred feet away across the open marsh and facing directly toward it stands

the house of Nils Flaten, a pioneer settler who has lived there continuously since 1884. The stone lay immediately below the surface of the ground, clutched in the grasp of the two largest roots of a poplar tree. One of the roots had followed the horizontal surface of the stone and then made an abrupt turn downward. The other root descended straight downward along the other side of the stone. *Both roots were flat on the side touching the stone.* At the two points where they passed over the edges of the stone they were wide and flat and sharply marked on the inside. It has been claimed that the runic forger might have dug a hole under a tree and then pushed the stone under the roots. Such a thing is possible but not in this case. It would be impossible to twist the tenacious roots of a tree about and hold them in place to make them conform to the shape of the stone so closely unless it grew up from a very small sapling after the stone was deposited there. Moreover, the flat surface of the roots prove that the tree must have grown up since the stone was placed.

These facts have been substantiated by numerous affidavits from people who saw the stump shortly after it was dug up; also that the tree was from eight to ten inches in diameter. A poplar tree grows rapidly in the open. But this tree grew in a block of dense timber, overshadowed by larger trees. Mr. Ohman also states that it was a sickly tree of stunted growth. In order to learn something of its probable age Mr. Ohman was requested to cut down two other poplars of the same size and physical appearance. He was also asked, for purpose of comparison, to cut down two other poplars of the same size but of thrifty appearance and vigorous growth. He carefully selected these four trees, cut them down, and sent in a cross section of each. The first two were found to have respectively sixty-eight and seventy-five annual rings of growth; the other two had forty and forty-five rings.²⁵

²⁵ Plate IV, volume XV, of the *Minnesota Historical Collections* shows cross sections of the healthy trees having forty and forty-five rings respectively. It was impossible to make a clear photographic copy of the stunted trees of same size, as the rings were too close and indistinct.

If, to be conservative, we assume that the tree was forty years old this brings us back to 1858 as the latest date when the stone could have been placed there. But this was many years before a single white settler had found his way to that section of the state. The first white settler in the county came there in 1865 and lived alone as a hermit in the wilderness for several years. Immigration followed the projected survey of the Great Northern Railway, which passed through Alexandria about twenty-five miles east of the finding place in 1878. At Alexandria Senator Knute Nelson was one of the first settlers. He took a homestead, now included within the city limits, in 1870.

In 1858 the nearest railroad point to the finding place of the stone was La Crosse. Not until 1862 was there any construction in Minnesota. In 1866 the first railroad west of St. Paul was built as far as St. Cloud, one hundred twenty miles from Kensington. No railroad reached Douglas County until 1878 when Alexandria, twenty-five miles from Kensington, was reached. If the Kensington inscription is a forgery we must suppose that a man of eminent runic, linguistic, and historical erudition set forth a hundred miles and more into an unsettled wilderness and there, exposed to attacks by savage animals and treacherous Indians, carved out a lengthy inscription which would bring him neither honor nor riches. This being done, he buries it upon a rough, timber-covered knoll surrounded by marshes—a place which an early visitor would never expect to see cultivated! Such a supposition is too remote to be credible.

II. The weathered appearance of the stone. The composition of the stone is described as follows by Professor N. H. Winchell: "The composition of the stone makes it one of the most durable in nature, equaling granite and almost equaling the dense quartzite of the pipestone quarry in the southwestern part of Minnesota. On the surface of this quartzite, even where exposed to the weather since they were formed, the fine

glacial scratches and polishing are well preserved, and when covered by drift clay they seem not to have been changed at all."²⁶

In 1910 when the controversy concerning the stone was at its height and a number of prominent scholars had pronounced it fraudulent because of the alleged presence of English words, etc., the stone was submitted to the examination of seven professional geologists. None of these experts were able to discover any evidence that the stone had been recently engraved. They were advised of the fact that prominent philologists considered the stone a modern forgery but notwithstanding this warning three of them did not hesitate positively to affirm that the inscription showed great age. Professor W. O. Hotchkiss, state geologist of Wisconsin, wrote the following statement: "After having carefully examined the so-called Kensington runic stone I have no hesitation in affirming that its inscription must have been carved very long ago—at least fifty to a hundred years."²⁷

Dr. Warren Upham, a specialist in glacial geology, gave the following opinion: "When we compare the excellent preservation of the glacial scratches shown on the back of the stone, which were made several thousand years ago, with the mellow, time-worn appearance of the face of the inscription, the conclusion is inevitable that this inscription must have been carved many hundred years ago."

Professor N. H. Winchell wrote as follows: "The general 'mellow' color of the face of the graywacke (rune stone) and of the whole surface of the stone is also to be noted. This is the first apparent effect of weathering. Graywacke may be estimated to be fifty to a hundred times more durable in the weather than calcite, some graywackes being more resistant than others. * * *

²⁶ *Minnesota Historical Collections*, XV, 237.

²⁷ Statement filed with Minnesota Historical Society.

"There are six stages of the weathering of graywacke which are exhibited by the stone, and they may be arranged approximately in a scale as follows:

1. A fresh break or cut..... 0
2. Break or cut shown by the runes of the face..... 5
3. Edge-face, which has not been engraved, but was
apparently dressed by a rough bush-hammering. 5
4. The inscribed face of the stone..... 10
5. The finely glaciated and polished back side and the
non-hammered portion of the edge..... 80
6. The coarse gouging and the general beveling and
deepest weathering of the back side..... 250 or 500

"These figures are but rough estimates and are intended to express the grand epochs of time through which the stone has passed since it started from the solid rock of which it formed a part prior to the Glacial period; and to a certain degree they are subject to the personal equation of the person who gives them. * * * If the figures in the foregoing series be all multiplied by 100, they would stand:

(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
000:	500:	500:	1,000:	8,000:	25,000 or 50,000

"Since 8,000 years is approximately the date of the end of the latest glaciation (5), the numbers may all be accepted as the approximate number of years required for the various stages of weathering. Hence stages (2) and (3) may have required each about 500 years."²⁸

III. The fourteen days' journey. The actual distance from Kensington to Hudson Bay at the mouth of Nelson River is about eight hundred fifty miles. To this must be added about two hundred miles for the windings of the river. This makes a total of ten hundred fifty miles which would make an average journey of seventy-five miles per day. To make seventy-five miles per day against a rapid current or on foot is manifestly impossible. This has, therefore, been used as an argument against the authenticity of

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 236-37.

the inscription. Such objectors overlook, however, that the physical impossibility of such a rate of travel would be just as obvious to the rune master as to the critics. If he were a forger he must have been a very learned and intelligent man and such a man would not have made such an obvious blunder. He would in all probability have computed the distance carefully and then divided it into easy journeys of twenty miles or less per day.

The rune master did not make a blunder, however, in stating that it was fourteen days' journey to the sea (Hudson Bay). The difficulty is that the meaning of the term "days' journey" has escaped us. The Norsemen of the Middle Ages did not have any measure such as we now use for estimating distances. The Norse word *mil*, like the English "mile," is derived from the Latin *mille*, a thousand, i.e., *milia passuum*, a thousand paces; we have no Norse nor Teutonic word for this. The Slavs have their *verst* and the Germans their *Stunde*, i.e., the distance covered in one hour's walking. This *Stunde* is a recognized unit of distance whether covered by the leisurely gait of a man or the swift pace of a trotting horse.

Similarly the Norsemen, whose travel was mostly done on the sea, had a recognized unit of distance. This was "a day's sail" or "a day's journey." Passing along shore from headland to headland these sailors early became experts in estimating distances, and the distance covered in a day's sail with a fair wind became a recognized unit of distance used irrespective of how many days it actually took to make the journey. This unit of distance for a twelve-hour day, or *dægr*, was from seventy-five to eighty-five miles per day. Thus we are always informed that the distance from Bergen to Iceland is "seven days' sail" although on that stormy sea it nearly always took several weeks to make the journey. Likewise we are told repeatedly that the distance from Iceland to

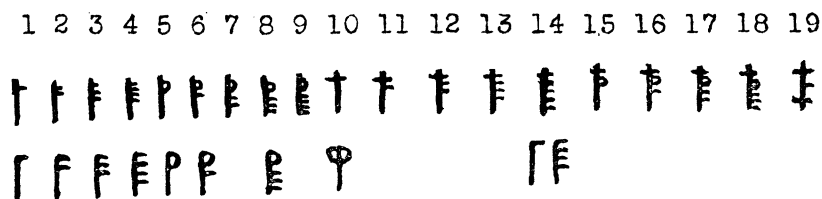
Greenland is "four days' sail" although this journey usually took several weeks owing to storms and adverse ice conditions. When, therefore, the rune master says it is fourteen days' journey to the sea he speaks in terms in which he was wont to think. He means to tell us that he estimates the distance at fourteen times eighty miles (a day's journey) or eleven hundred twenty miles. This agrees very well with actual facts. However, this method of reckoning distance is not suggestive of modern authorship.

IV. The numerals. For many years after the rune stone was found the most mystifying feature about it was the numerals. It was long before they were correctly interpreted. When this was done they were pointed to as strong proof of the modern fabrication of the inscription, seeing that the rune master "was unable to write dates and numbers except in a system of his own invention." It was not until 1909—eleven years after the stone was found—that Helge Gjessing, a philologist of Christiania, was able to show that these numerals were not an invention of the runic scribe but were in perfect accord with runic numerals used in the Middle Ages.²⁹ This is another testimony of the unusual scholarship that would be required in a modern forger to write this extraordinary inscription.

Gjessing points out that a Danish writer by the name of Ole Worm in 1643 published a work in Latin, entitled *Fasti Danici*, in which these runic numerals occur. This work has never been translated nor reprinted. The rune master, if he were a forger, must therefore have had access to very rare books and was able to read Latin. As to these numerals, Ole Worm in this part of his work discusses the ancient *primstave*, or household calendars, which were in use in the Scandinavian countries in the Middle Ages. These calendars consisted of flat sticks of wood about thirty inches long and two inches wide. Upon them was carved a multitude of signs to repre-

²⁹ See his article in *Symra*, Decorah, Iowa, for 1909, No. 3, 116-19.

sent the many holy days of the Church, separated by a series of dots indicating the number of intervening days. Besides this, some of these *primstave* also contained nineteen numerals—one for each of the moon cycle's nineteen years—by help of which one could figure out the different dates upon which the new moons of that year would appear. However, when we compare the numerals on the rune stone with the corresponding numerals in Worm's book we find a difference. The accompanying illustration shows that they are the same in type but differ in detail in every figure:



This difference in form shows that while the rune master is familiar with the system of numerals preserved for us by Worm he has followed another model; which indicates that he wrote at a time when these *primstave* were in daily use and plentiful, i.e., in the fourteenth century.

There is another significant thing about these numbers and that is the rune master's way of writing the numbers 10 and 14. The old Scandinavians used "twenty" as a base in their system of notation. Larger numbers were expressed as so and so many "twenties." This system still survives etymologically in such archaic terms as *et halvt tjau*, i.e., "half a twenty" = 10; *tres*, "three (twenties)" = 60; *halv-fjers*, "half of the fourth (twenty)" = 70, etc. We therefore find, not nine, but twenty units in their system of notation. Nineteen of these units are shown in the illustration of the numbers used on the *primstave*.

The rune master does not use this system. In writing number 14 he uses two digits, or, in other words, the compara-

tively modern decimal system which has 10 for its base. He also uses this in writing 22 and 1362. Gjessing has shown that the decimal system was introduced in the North prior to 1362.⁸⁰ One might object that the rune master probably knew nothing about the rather obscure history of notation and wrote as he was wont, thinking that our common decimal system had always been in use. This view is, however, excluded when we see how he writes the number 10. An ordinary person not knowing the history of the decimal system would invariably write 10 with two digits. This has become such a fixed rule with us that it is difficult to imagine it was ever otherwise. The rune master however uses only one digit. The reason for this is that while the decimal system was introduced into Europe about 1200 A. D. at first it had only the figures 1 to 9; the zero was not introduced until about two hundred years later. If the rune master had written 10 with two digits he would have committed a serious anachronism; but in this as in other things he has shown himself to be in strict conformity to the usage and limitations of his time.

These numerals, therefore, so long a puzzle to the critics, prove to contain two cogent arguments corroborating the authenticity of the inscription.

V. *AVM*: Save from evil. In the intimate conformity of this prayer with fourteenth century usage we have another evidence of the genuineness of the inscription. This was, like many other parts of the inscription, objected to, the assertion being made that the rune master by the use of the salutation, "Hail, Mary!" (*Ave Maria*) in the beginning of a prayer for deliverance from bodily peril showed himself to be a modern Lutheran or non-Catholic, not conversant with the proper use of Catholic prayers. The *Angelica Salutatio* of which the above *Ave Maria* (Hail, Mary) is the familiar beginning, is not, as is well known at least to all Catholics,

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 117.

a prayer for deliverance from bodily peril but a greeting of adoration, a divine salutation. A modern Scandinavian forger of non-Catholic faith who would have picked up his knowledge of Catholic usage through literary channels would therefore not have chosen this phrase, *Ave Maria*, in this connection. Particularly would this be true if he understood Latin (as is shown by the preceding paragraph he must have done). He would then at once have been conscious that the salutation, "Hail, Mary," would not seem proper as the beginning of a prayer for deliverance from evil. The presumption that this is the work of a modern forger therefore seems excluded.

In the fourteenth century, however, conditions were different. In those comparatively illiterate days the frequent intonation of the Angelic Salutation had given to the expression, *Ave Maria*, an almost talismanic power and the two words were largely used as one divine name, or *Ave* was used as an attribute of *Maria*.³¹ The fact that the three letters *A V M* are written without any separating marks, whereas all other words in the inscription are separated by double points, indicates that the rune master considered them as one name. To him it was the most sacred name he knew and he wished to express reverence in writing it. He therefore used Latin letters—the language of the Church—in writing them. Archbishop Ireland was deeply impressed by the peculiar wording of this prayer and stated that it was strong evidence to him that it was written in the Middle Ages.³²

As to the prayer, *fræelse af illy*, which has been condemned as an Anglicism, we find it literally in an ancient folklore poem harking back to the Black Plague (A. D. 1349) but which came to light several years after the stone was found. I give the first stanza below, and will call special

³¹ Liljegren states that *Ave Maria* occurs frequently on inscriptions of the Middle Ages as introductory to all kinds of prayers. See his *Runlære*, 166-69.

³² St. Paul *Dispatch*, Dec. 14, 1909.

attention to the last two lines, which, with a slight variation, serve as a refrain throughout the ballad:

Svartedauen for laand aa straad,
 Aa sopa so mangei tilje;
 De vi eg no fer sanno tru,
 De var kje me Herrens vilje.
 Hjælpe oss Gud aa Maria Møy,
 Frelse oss alle av illi!

The Black Plague sped (over) land and sea
 And swept so many a board (floor).
 That will I now most surely believe,
 It was not with the Lord's will.
 Help us God and Virgin Mary,
 Save us all from evil!³³

Here, as will be noted, we have not only our "illy" phonetically reproduced but we have literally the same prayer as on the stone plus the redundant *oss alle*. The ballad also, like the prayer in the inscription, uses the ancient preposition *af*, which has long since been superseded by *fra*. Altogether, this prayer shows most striking conformity to fourteenth century usage here substantiated in its entirety in this old ballad which was not published until many years after the rune stone was found.

There are several other aspects of the inscription which speak strongly for its genuineness, particularly the runic characters. A discussion of these, however, would be too technical and voluminous to be attempted in a popular presentation like this. While the arguments cited above may not separately be considered as conclusive, their aggregate weight is such as to leave little doubt that we have in this inscription a most important record dating from the fourteenth century. On the other hand, not a single argument has yet been pre-

³³ This folksong was communicated by Mr. Olav Tortvei, Moorhead, Minn., to Mr. Torkel Oftelie, a folklorist of Fergus Falls, Minn., by whom it was printed in *Telesoga*, No. 1, 1909. Mr. Tortvei was an octogenarian pioneer, now dead, who, though illiterate, remembered hundreds of old ballads which he had heard in his childhood. Mr. Oftelie sent this ballad—*Førnesbrønen*—to the eminent folklorist Rikard Berge of Telemarken, Norway, who said he had not met with it in his researches.

sented against the inscription which has been found to be valid. It seems obvious that it would be impossible for a present-day forger to construct an inscription of such length and multiplicity of ideas without leaving indubitable proof of his forgery. Particularly would this be true of an inscription purporting to date from the fourteenth century which is a peculiarly difficult period linguistically, runologically, and historically. The multitude of errors which critics have made in reviewing the inscription shows the difficulties any one of these men would have encountered if he had attempted to invent such an inscription. Yet this inscription, coming from an uninhabited wilderness, has survived all attacks made upon it for more than twenty years.

In view of this and in view of the great significance of its message, it is surely time for our learned societies and institutions to cease their "waiting and watching" attitude and take energetic action in thoroughly investigating the subject.³⁴

³⁴ After this article had been sent to the press word was received from Mr. Holand that he had located the two skerries mentioned in the inscription and had made certain other discoveries in connection therewith. A brief account of these discoveries will be given in an early issue of this magazine.